

**Book Review: Bijl, P., & Chin, G. V. S. (Eds.) (2020):
Appropriating Kartini - Colonial, National and
Transnational Memories of an Indonesian Icon**

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In the first chapter of their edited book *Appropriating Kartini*, Paul Bijl, a Dutch historian based in Utrecht, and Grace V. S. Chin, a feminist historian at University Sains Malaysia, introduce the national, regional, and transnational appropriations of Kartini – a young Javanese woman who lived in Jepara, Central Java, between 1879 and 1904. As they indicate, today Kartini is recognised internationally as an iconic feminist and nationalist Indonesian figure and is, after Anne Frank, the most widely-read and influential, (originally) Dutch-language author worldwide in the 20th and 21st centuries. Since 1911, her letters, first published in Dutch as *Door Duisternis tot Licht* (lit. *Through Darkness to Light*), have been translated into numerous languages including French, Russian, Japanese, Javanese, Sundanese, and Arabic. Several versions of Indonesian and English translations also exist. In the 1960s, a republication of the first 1920 English-language translation of a selection of her writings was included in the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works.

This book discusses a diversity of appropriative acts and examines the significance of the roles played by a variety of actors and institutions who produced and claimed their versions and interpretations of the Kartini persona (Mohamad, 2004). All eight chapters of the book are written by non-Indonesian scholars and are, thus, strongly oriented towards Western contexts and appropriations, drawing on classical theories of modernity or European Enlightenment. The chapters are arranged along a colonial-postcolonial trajectory, providing a good overview of the different settings of a continuing contestation, appropriation, and debate over Kartini's biography, memory, and legacy.

The second chapter, written by Joost Coté, a Dutch-Australian historian, is entitled "Crafting Reform: Kartini and the Imperial Imagination, 1898-1911". This chapter points to how contemporary imperial interests silenced Kartini's other voice, including her criticism of European racism, sexism, and exoticism, as well as her ridicule of Dutch paternalism. Coté investigates how Kartini had already been imagined by Dutch colonials in the colonial capital and abroad at the time her name and writings began circulating in the media in the Netherlands and its East Indies colony while she was alive, and increasingly after her edited letters were published

in 1911, to conjure up a new vision of an imperial mission (p.17). In her 1903 memorandum to the colonial government “Give the Javanese Education”, Kartini had pointed to an emerging reformist imperial discourse advocating “Native education” – a discourse which then referenced her in a critique of the colonial moral order and of the rationalization for the conquest of “backward” feudal states and for the reform of “primitive” Native societies. This position was appropriated by Jacques Abendanon, the colonial director of native education (1900-1905), in the pursuit of his progressive agenda for a greater access to (Dutch) education for the Javanese people and an ethical policy (p.19), which later motivated his publication of Kartini’s correspondence (Abendanon, 1911).

In the third chapter, entitled “Hierarchies of Humanity: Kartini in America and UNESCO”, Bijl reflectively examines how Kartini has been presented and used by many of her Western appropriators as a rare historical figure. Placing Kartini on a global stage, Bijl argues, thereby reproduces structural inequalities – a double hierarchy, namely, between “provincials” and “cosmopolitans” – despite the fact that Kartini was aware of the colonial discourse and very often uses irony as a strong weapon to criticize the way Westerners maintain European racialized discourse/scientific racism, sexism, exoticism, paternalism, or Eurocentrism at large. In the US, where Kartini appears in the prestigious *Atlantic* magazine, she is presented as a lonely voice in an “unknown” land, “a saint of the lower order” who strived for “a city upon the hill” (p. 66). Here, as Bijl shows, Kartini’s own appropriation of Western, liberal conceptions of human equality and inequality were in turn appropriated to offer readers a dose of cosmopolitanism as well as to bolster a US sense of exceptionalism (p. 56). This was clearly the case with regard to the original 1920 English translation, “Letters of a Javanese Princess”, designed to advance a cosmopolitan feminism. Bijl provides here a very reflective and grounded piece on the trajectories of Western cosmopolitan discourse.

The fourth chapter, written by Grace V. S. Chin, is entitled “Ambivalent Narration: Kartini’s Silence and the Other Woman”. This section problematizes the way Kartini presented herself and her status as a female *priyayi* through her use of (eloquent) Dutch language to her Dutch friends. Here, Chin asserts that Kartini’s performativity is characterized by ambivalence, as she lived within a Javanese social world with its complex feudal system and its male-centric discourses of Javanese nobility (p. 77). She points out how Kartini’s narration underlines the continued dominance of the Javanese elite in Indonesian political life (cf. Rutherford, p. 119, for a different view, where Kartini is said to have had no need to choose between *rakyat*, ordinary citizen or the people, and *ningrat*, the Javanese royal nobility).

The fifth chapter is a republication of Danilyn Rutherford’s 1993 article, entitled “Unpacking a National Heroine: Two Kartinis and Their People”. Rutherford – a cultural anthropologist who has written extensively on West Papua – emphasizes how *Door duisternis tot licht* was a bestselling book produced within the net of Dutch scholarship and colonial frames, and compares this with the post-colonial Indonesian reading and translations by Pramoedya Ananta Toer¹ and Siti Soemandari Soeroto².

1 Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925-2006) is Indonesia’s greatest political author. He spent most of his life-time incarcerated by the colonial powers and, later, by different Indonesian governments. His works have been translated into 20 languages and distributed worldwide.

2 Siti Soemandari Soeroto (1909-1994) is an Indonesian feminist and journalist. She published a book on Kartini’s biography in 1979.

She further explains how Kartini occupies a position in discourse as well as in history. She argues that Kartini's ambiguity presents a source of challenge that reflects both modern contradictions as well as colonial ones.

Chapter Six is written by Kathryn Robinson, an Australian feminist, and is entitled "Call Me Kartini? Kartini as a Floating Signifier in Indonesian History". In line with the title, Robinson argues that Kartini's ideas have become a floating signifier that has been shifted and developed politically, culturally, and as part of a system of meaning-making, not limited to gender relations and women's social roles in Indonesia.

Chapter Seven is also a republication of an earlier chapter by Paul Bijl, entitled "Kartini and the Politics of European Multiculturalism", in which readers are invited to reflect on the way "sound" and "silence" are always unevenly distributed. Here, Bijl shows how Kartini uses her voice and meaningful silence in criticizing Javanese feudalism as well as Dutch scientific racism.

In the reflective and critical afterword of Chapter Eight, Jean Gelman Taylor – an Australian historian of Indonesia – emphasises again that Kartini has become attached to the specific interest of commentators, politicians, and scholars over the past years. She further appreciates what Coté (2014) has brought to the fore in his more recent compilation of Kartini's writings, namely, activities of Kartini that have been neglected or unknown by most critics, translators, and academics. Taylor also suggests that the many different views contributors have offered in this study of the appropriations of Kartini should encourage readers to reflect on themselves as creators of words and to consider more deeply how they (we) write histories.

Notwithstanding the discourse these scholars evoke, the word 'appropriation' in the book's title also deserves mention. The term adequately represents the ambiguous nature of the readings of each author as well as of Kartini the person. On the one side, appropriation can be understood negatively, as an act likened to stealing, while, on the other, appropriation can be seen as a positive and an unavoidable act of making something proper to one's self (cf. Young, 2010). We believe that the book encourages the readers to understand appropriation in the latter sense. Overall, to read and re-read Kartini, who died at the young age of 24, and to read and re-read the appropriations of her, continues to provoke emotional and postcolonial sensitivities, as well as incite intellectual introspection. This book is a valuable contribution to what has already become a century-long national and international reflection on the person of Kartini and on what she has come to symbolize over time. It will be of interest not only to those concerned with the continuing appropriation and transnational representations of Kartini, but also to a wider readership, including young scholars of modern history and social sciences in Southeast Asia and beyond.



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